

# Education, Poverty and Class

In 1995 I graduated at the University of Plymouth with an Honours Degree in Fine Art. I got a 2.2.

I was the only student graduating in Fine Art that year who couldn't attend the awards ceremony by reason of poverty. I was so poor that I had to borrow £10 from a friend in London just to get some food.

The degree awards ceremony demanded that everyone attending to receive their degree certificate must wear a mortar board and gown. I couldn't afford to hire a costume for the occasion (and I also didn't like the idea of it because it smacked of preserving all the rotten old traditions which have been oppressing us for centuries) so I couldn't attend.

Instead I had to collect my degree certificate from the university office.

I arrived at the office, asked the nice lady behind the counter if there was an envelope for me, showed my student I.D. and was given the envelope containing my shiny new second class honours degree certificate.

That was all there was. A piece of paper in an envelope. No advice for the future or support with career prospects or any other kind of thing. I would've quite liked a free ticket to a psychiatrist, considering that the stress of the three year degree course and the struggle to make ends meet had driven me very close to the edge of insanity. Come to think of it I would've quite liked a sandwich and a cup of tea. But there was only a piece of paper in an envelope and that was it.

I was 42. I had started the course at the age of 39. During those three years I'd had the same grant that younger students got but they were able to go home to their parents during the spring, summer and Christmas breaks. I had to make my grant stretch through the term and then through the break as well. I had the student loans on top of the grant but it still wasn't enough.

The University of Plymouth had sprung from the metamorphosis of Polytechnic South West and, in the mid-1990s, still had its departments located in different towns and cities all across the southwest of England. I was at the art department which was still in Exeter and, being quite a long way from the main campus in Plymouth, there were no "halls of residence" or any proper student accommodation. We had to rent flats independently and I had to find ways to pay the rent during the spring, summer and Christmas break times.

I had two entirely separate part-time cleaning jobs and I was still struggling.

The Topsham landlord I rented from in 1994 played a dirty trick on me. Because I was short of money for food he told me that it would be perfectly alright for me to wait until the grant cheque arrived in September and then pay him the three months back rent for the summer retroactively. He seemed perfectly happy with this arrangement.

Then, one week before the new term was about to begin, he posted an eviction notice on the door of my flat.

I phoned him up and tried to find out why he had done this thing to me. Why had he pretended to be perfectly okay getting the rent retroactively and then decided to evict me mere days before the cheque was due to arrive?

He said, "Yes, well, perhaps I did mislead you....."

I said, "You admit that you misled me but what was the reason?"

The only explanation he would give me was, "I felt bad and I made a decision".

I asked him again and he repeated, "I felt bad and I made a decision".

I wasn't able to get any more than that from him.

I said, "Just to clarify. When the cheque arrives next week and I pay you every bit of rent exactly as we have agreed, do you still intend to evict me in spite of the agreement having been completely fulfilled?"

He confirmed that he was still going to evict me in any case.

He would not tell me why.

There had been no previous indication that he disliked me or wanted me to leave. If I had known that he wanted to get rid of me I would have moved out voluntarily.

My priority then became ensuring that I would not become homeless. When the grant cheque arrived I immediately used it to rent a new flat and to pay the rent on that flat in advance all the way from September through to the beginning of the January term when the next grant cheque would come. I was thus covered against homelessness in my third year at university and the bastard who had broken our agreement without any sensible reason could go whistle for his money as far as I was concerned.

I moved out of Topsham and moved into the new flat in Prospect Park.

Of course the Topsham landlord then sued me for the back rent which he would've had already if he hadn't broken the agreement so I then had to find ways to pay him in instalments while I wrote my thesis and completed the modules for the final three terms of the degree.

My thesis was titled "Mythologies: Ancient and Modern", styled after the title of the hymn book we had in school when I was a child "Hymns: Ancient and Modern".

I took the approach that fine art had begun in ancient times when mark making depicted gods, heroes and monsters and that the artists' work had then transitioned over the centuries to depict Christian, Pagan, Hindu and Buddhist characters and events.

Eventually art had entered a period of Modernity with portraits of capitalist merchants. Stylistically the radical jump into Modernity came with the romantic depiction of landscapes which didn't contain any people. Seemingly a mindblowing concept at the time because landscapes had only ever been the background.

I found references in the works of Joseph Campbell and Roland Barthes for my ancient mythologies and modern ones. I struggled a lot getting every sentence written in a style which, I hoped, wasn't just babbling incoherent rubbish.

The writing began to get away from me and there were times when I found it difficult to tell whether I was writing sense or nonsense. Each week I visited the office of very capable John Danvers who is a Buddhist chaplain in Exeter University. In 1995 he was my Plymouth University thesis tutor. John questioned each statement and reference that I made in the pages I brought to him and I defended my words to the best of my ability.

The thesis rambled a bit through examples of myth creation and references to Freud's "Parapraxis" and Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious. Rambling even further into Claude Lévi-Straus for anthropology explanations and to post-Freudians and feminists and semiotic systems of synthesising signs from a union of signifier and signified. I gave examples of the palimpsest principle of myth making wherein Don Quixote or Sam Spade contain references to the knights of old and those knights of old sought the holy grail which, in turn, is a reference to Christ on the cross. The palimpsest process continues with Jesus' continual references in his teachings to Rabbinic law while, at the same time, the growing legend of Jesus as "Christ" references the Greek tradition of heroes who are part human and part the sons of gods.

I had diagrams of signifier and signified drawn in the style of vector mechanics. In the process of connecting all of these dots while also doing my practical work for the remaining modules of the course and holding down two cleaning jobs I was getting very, very stressed. I was also going out hunting on Saturdays and attending meetings of Friends of the Earth, East Devon Animal Rights, East Devon Anti-Bloodsports and Exeter Anti-Fascist Action. I was campaigning against the Criminal Justice Bill and doing the research for the remaining bit of the thesis.

I was very, very, very tired and I used to come back to my flat in the evenings after the cleaning job at County Hall and the Friends of the Earth meetings and I would switch on the television and just fall asleep in the armchair, only to be woken up at about 4 a.m. by whatever noise, perhaps the people upstairs getting home from nightclubs. The TV would be showing whatever rubbish happened to be on at 4 a.m., perhaps Channel Four's horseracing from Kempton Park (which, as an animal welfarist, I hated) and I would switch it off and transfer my aching exhausted body from the chair to the bed and sleep a few more hours.

Somehow I managed to pull the thesis together and get a passing mark. It helped that John Danvers' own interests in fine art included "The Archaeology of Seeing" which takes this approach of digging down to the levels below.

In one part of the thesis I speculated about Freudian symbols and raised a question as to whether it is only the obvious sexual parts of the body which are strong psychological symbols. Should we follow Freud in interpreting symbolic elements in art and dreams only as penises, breasts, wombs and vaginas? Or should we also be looking for intestinal symbols, brain symbols, lung symbols, bone symbols, circulatory symbols, nerve symbols? Is the subconscious only obsessed with sexuality? Or is the obsession rather with physicality and the real solid contact between our bodies and the physical world?

It seemed to me that dance was a great key to the mysteries of mind, body and surrounding environment.

Anyway, I covered as much as I could of the possible questions to ask about mark making in relation to myth making and our perception on the world, nature and history.

There were good tutors like John Danvers or Sarah Bennett and there were utter stinkers like the guy who was supposed to be my “personal tutor” for “pastoral advice and support” but who actually hated my guts because I was campaigning against bloodsports and he was of the opposite opinion. He found it difficult to even look at my work and he wouldn’t even call it “work”. Instead he called it a “protest”.

When I heard the news that a friend in Taunton had committed suicide by hanging himself I asked this so-called “personal tutor” for an appointment to discuss the emotional impact of my friend’s suicide. The tutor refused, claiming that he was too busy.

Since I didn’t have any designated space where I could do my work in the university building I had to keep moving from place to place via the corridors. I passed the same tutor in the corridor about 20 or 30 minutes after had refused me an appointment. He laughed and grinned at me and jokingly said “Ha! You look a bit lost!”

I wrote a letter of complaint to him about his callousness. The letter was several pages long, written in pencil and block capitals (I was angry). He then made an appointment for me but not to discuss the emotional impact of the suicide. No. The appointment was to discuss my “rudeness” in sending him a letter of complaint.

In the first year there was an exchange tutor from New Orleans who had the utter cheek to brazenly stand up in the lecture theatre and tells us that, in his opinion, fine art in Britain in the 1990s was about up to the same level that American art had been in the 1950s. Instead of shouting him down we all sat there and continued staring into space and thinking about our own stuff. Perhaps we were being polite or perhaps we didn’t react because we didn’t really care what he thought. (Ahh! Makes you feel proud to be British!)

I was very upset when the work I wanted to do for one module was almost completely blocked by not being able to get the canvases I needed from the technician. The technician was supposed to make canvases in the size and shape required by the students but when I asked for three triangular canvases they didn’t arrive. I had written the declaration of the piece of work I wanted to do for the module. It required three triangular canvases upon which I would paint a triptych. I would then place the three canvases upon the floor, leaning their apexes together to form a tetrahedron structure.

The idea was to create a free standing 3D work from three 2D works. There were some other bits which I would add to represent the idea of a one-dimensional aspect. The fourth dimension or time-based element would be represented by the process of walking around the tetrahedron to see all three visible sides. The fourth side of pyramid faced the floor and was hidden. The work was partly about language as well as dimensionality. In one part of it was reference to Egyptian hieroglyphics and, in another part, to Morse Code.

Weeks went by and still the three canvases didn't arrive. I inquired about them and all I got was that the technician was overworked.

About one week from the end of the module I walked in and found an object waiting for me in my space. It wasn't three triangular canvases. It was a large wooden tetrahedron. My request for three triangular canvases had been ignored or forgotten and, instead, the staff had misread my statement about creating a tetrahedron from the three canvases. It was too late to get the canvases I wanted and so I had to work with a bloody wooden tetrahedron in a "beggars can't be choosers" way.

I created the nearest approximation to the original idea that I could manage and then wrote my concluding remarks explaining why the end result wasn't quite the same piece of work which I had described at the beginning. It would have to do.

Anyway, I got a good degree and my final work of the course was there for anyone to see in the degree show for 1995. I was not, however, featured in the degree show catalogue. The catalogue was not a listing of everyone whose work was in the show.

The catalogue was a listing of everyone whose work was in the show and was able to pay the money to be included in the catalogue.

I was the only student too POOR to pay the money and get a page in the book. My work, however, was still there to be seen and I created my own little computer printout page and slipped it in between the pages of the official catalogue book.

If you happened to be there that year and picked up a copy of the catalogue my page was the unofficial poor relation page included as an addendum on cheap computer printer paper.

The description I put in there stated that my degree show work was "MOSTLY INTERACTIVE MOVIES" and included "FOUR COMPUTER-BASED PIECES + ONE VIDEO:

1. AN INTERACTIVE EXPLORATION OF THE HUMAN BRAIN,
2. A GALLERY IN CYBERSPACE,
3. "STATIC JIVE" HOW DOES TELEVISION DEAL WITH DEATH? (WHY DO WE CRY MORE FOR BAMBI THAN BOSNIA?)
4. LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORM OF A PACK OF CARDS.
5. VIDEO PIECE: "EARTH"
- 6.

And so, having completed all the modules of the course, written the thesis, put on the show pieces and received the degree certificate, I was free to bugger off and make room for the next lot of freshers.

Newly elevated to the dizzy heights of “letters after my name” (I told everyone that the letters after my name were “probably mostly hate mail”. Depressive self deprecating lame joke. That’s pretty much where my head was at). I still had to work in my part-time jobs. I still had to pay the rent. I still had to figure out what I was going to do next.

I had left comprehensive school in 1969 a few months before my 16th birthday and I went to work as a 15 year old office boy for one of Rupert Murdoch’s companies in Fleet Street. I had no “O Levels” or “A Levels”. I went back to school many years later to get those. 30 years later I was a BA (hons) working in low paid part-time jobs.

When people talk about the greater social mobility which we now enjoy as a result of all those wonderful changes which have happened since the 1960s it always seems that they are glossing over everything which hasn’t changed or which has changed for the worse. It’s an indeterminate number of steps forward and an indeterminate number of steps backward. Things change but there’s still class and the class system still oppresses. There’s still a House of Lords and a bloody king!!!!

Paradoxically I’m as much against the class system as I’m proud of being working class. I’m proud of being intellectual. I’m proud that I worked for half a century in honest jobs and earned the right to retire. I had a bucket list from when I was young. Go to drama school, go to art school, work with old people, work with children, do something for the environment, learn to play the guitar, write at least one book, work with animals, etc. etc. I’ve done a lot of the things I wanted to do.

I was too poor to go abroad until 1994 when I was near the end of my second year of the degree. Then I was able to get away for a few weeks doing a travelling sketch book idea for a module of the course. I spent nine days in Paris and then a week in Amsterdam and a week in Brussels. It was my first time outside the U.K. and I loved it.

Doing the degree was fun. It might not sound like it when I talk about how hard it was but there really was a lot of fun in between the problems I had to keep solving. I learned a lot, partly from the utter adversity of the various situations.